

# Executive Presbyter's Report

Written February 25, 2014

**The presbytery's mission, which we have worked on together over the past two years, has determined much of this meeting's agenda.** According to the Vision and Strategy of the presbytery, the presbytery's purpose is to facilitate local congregations and ministries, and to facilitate communication within the presbytery and beyond.

At this meeting, we are inviting elders to give their reports in ways that name joys and concerns we can pray for, describe presbytery work that is going on in their communities, and describe ways in which they believe the presbytery could be of assistance. This means we will be hearing reports on how presbytery trustees, or the committee on ministry, or any other arm of the presbytery is at work specifically from elders speaking about their own local mission. Ruling Elders, please be thinking about how to report on your congregations. We are all anxious to hear.

**There is much study and talk these days about the immense changes in our culture.** And there is much talk about how these changes are affecting the Christian Church. With this in mind, there are a few points I wish to lift up.

*First, the future of the presbytery must center more in new ministries* and new efforts than in the old, attractional church model. These days, people are not necessarily attracted to church to church to seek spiritual food. When un-churched people are moved spiritually, they are just as likely look for answers on the internet or in self-help books as they are to turn to traditional religious sources.

Village ministries are talking about the old days when their churches were full, noting that full churches is not what is happening these days. To a large degree the same can be said for churches on the road system. All churches these days are discovering that they have to find new ways of doing their church work. We need to hear once again the call of the Bible. Again and again they call us to "sing a new song to the Lord!" This is about the new thing that God is doing, and the new way that we offer our worship and life-responses to God.

In the same way, we need to be engaging in new ministries. Indeed, there is something contagious about new ministries. The small group that begins a new ministry is convinced that this is something unique to their community that must be done for Christ. Such people believe in their ministry and are proud to be involved. Their fire is contagious, and others are glad to join.

For this reason presbyteries and churches that are building teams of people to go after new projects and ministries are the vibrant churches of today. These days it is not unusual for these new ministries not to have buildings, or traditional staff. Yet, these ministries are always characterized by work steeped in the bible, in prayer, and in outreaching love.

Having said that, I believe there is great hope for today's churches. There is ministry to be done. Such ministry demands commitment; but such ministry reaps great rewards.

***I do want to offer a few cautions, though.*** Presbyteries and churches that are focusing their efforts on how to keep old ministries going are either on hospice now, or they will be soon. If our ministries are to thrive, they must be focused on where the Spirit would put their energy now. This must include some new initiatives.

The stress that is present during times of great change can inspire new work for God, but it can also inspire strife within congregations. I believe that it is essential that we renew our efforts in prayer, study, fellowship and service. The frustrations that arise when old ways of doing ministry must change can be destructive if they cause members either to blame themselves and enter into depression, or to blame others and injure the health of Christian fellowship. We are seeing signs of this kind of response in American churches these days.

Keeping our spiritual practices fresh and alive allows God to open us afresh to the movements of the Spirit. It therefore follows that we need to form what I call *Christian Sharing Groups*. In such groups we are encouraged to share what is happening in among us, how we are encountering God, what we are studying, learning, and trying on behalf of Christ Jesus, and how the Spirit is giving us vision and Spirit-energy for meaningful mission. It is in this kind of sharing that we experience the body and blood of Christ, and it is in the sharing that we discover that we have loaves and drink to share with other hungry souls.

We are in a time when the church must change. It is out of that belief that I encourage you to think of what Christian groups you need to form in order to keep yourselves away from depression or blaming, and in order to keep your ministry alive with the newness of the resurrected Christ.

**We are in a time of amazing ministry opportunities, which are to be done in new ways.** It is time to sing a New Song—or at least to sing the Old Gospel Story, but in a *new* key that fits a changing culture! This requires all of us to step up our game. We will need to give our best energy, imagination and love to this work. We will need to try something new, recruit new people to help design it, and support it with our best time, money and talents. With this in mind I hope this meeting of the presbytery will be a time characterized by the sharing of ideas. This needs to be a time for recognizing the opportunities God has set before us, and finding creative ways to address them.

**On a personal note, this past year my job description changed.** I was asked to reduce my work by 60 days per year. I have been using my off time for ministry that the presbytery probably would not pay me to do, putting my time in Earth Care Ministry in one form or another. Some of that work eventually worked its way into presbytery efforts. I am immensely encouraged because of others in the presbytery, who have joined me in pouring their passion into this work. Throughout the next two days you will see the evidence of this calling on our lives.